



## **CONSTRUCTION OF QUEER CHARACTERS IN THE NEW TURKISH CINEMA (2004-2013)**

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The aim of this study is to discuss the construction of queer characters in the New Turkish cinema within the concept of gender roles. The study asks how the structure is constructed if this structure works to highlight or re-strengthen the given gender inequalities in the society or not, and whether the articulation of these characters to the films is a result of necessity about stories of them or these articulations are eclectic with commercial or other concerns.

**Keywords:** Turkish film, Gender, Queer, Identity.

### **Theoretical Background**

Gender is a factor in organizing daily life for individuals, families, communities, and societies as large structures. Gender necessarily involves bodies of actual people and the ways that they see and experience themselves, their identities (Acker, 2013: 3). Butler (1988) states that “gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure”.

According to Giddens; while sex refers to physical differences of body, gender either take into consideration psychological, social and cultural differences of between man and woman. A fundamental distinction between sex and gender distinction, because in terms of the the origin of biological differences between men and women are not qualified (Giddens, 2000: 97), and also states that (1981); gender identity is gained through a process of socialization. Individuals, the cultural and economic environment in which they live, and behavioral patterns learned information gain their gender identities. Sex must be placed in a position equivalent degree with gender because both are subject to variables and constructed so it is possible to deconstruct (Schwichtenberg, 1995: 185). Gender usually refers to the “behavioral and attitudinal characteristics” as well as roles that are learned and derived from a “particular cultural milieu”. Thus, gender divisions are often symbolized in ‘what goes on in the setting or the background of a commercial’ (Monash University, 2013).

While biological sex is related to male and female categories, gender is related to people’s psychological and sociological concerning. Gender role refers to the behaviors and desires to act in certain ways that are viewed as masculine or feminine by a particular culture. Differences between gender and sex depend on the own biological body. Gender-related to identity role, that means gender identity serves as a social identity.

Sexual identity is the perception of individual’s own body and self-respect in sexuality; it is a tendency in our own behaviors and feelings appropriately. Sometimes conditions that are discordant with

persons' bodies and their sexual tendencies may emerge. Foucault believes that this condition is called as homosexuality, which is not as a sexual relation kind, but is the feature of a definite sexual sensitivity, a person who is in himself/herself made a female and male change in place (Foucault 1993). Homosexuality can express the tendency and request that male and female have sexual relations with persons who are from their own similar sexes.

According to identity theory, an identity is a set of meanings applied to the self in a social role or situation, defining what it means to be who one is in that role or situation (Burke & Cast, 1997: 278). Egan and Perry's assumes that gender is viewed as the identity as a multidimensional construct encompassing an individual's (a) knowledge of membership in a gender category, (b) felt compatibility with his or her gender group, (c) felt pressure for gender conformity, and (d) attitudes toward gender groups (Egan & Perry, 2001: 451).

Terms are separated terms as sex and gender, sex refers to the cluster of biological, chromosomal, and anatomical features associated with maleness and femaleness in the human body. Gender refers to that which a society deems "masculine" or "feminine." Gender identity refers an individual's self-identification as a man, woman, transgendered or other identities, that like a lesbian, gay, or bisexual. This is a sexual orientation that refers to an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes (For a Better Understanding Of Sexual Orientation & Homosexuality, 2013: 1).

The process of socialization is effective in determining people's gender roles. People have become acquired they can reveal gender roles due to metropolitan life affect socialization speed. Increase in the homosexual male and female consumers in the categories of gender to have been noticed by a market. Sometimes who make advertorial films targeting to market in that, heterosexuals cannot see any attentions or messages, that is a normal advertorial for those. But homosexuals can take different messages in the advertorials. That means some advertorials make for only homosexuals. That is also important buyers like heterosexuals. The history of homosexuality within capitalism is a history of marginalization and exploitation. Even as capitalism created the conditions by which homosexuality (and "sexual identity" in general) could flourish, it was by no means kind to the homosexual community, harming it by limiting and repressing those types of sexual expression which were disruptive to its social order. A logical starting point for this history would be the birth of capitalism out of previous modes of production (Arrivo, 2013: 17).

In the postmodern era, with the works of philosophers and thinkers such as Foucault, Kristeva, Lacan, the gender -as the other subjects related to identity and individual- gains in importance in humanity and social sciences.

### **Cinema and Gender, Homosexuality and Queer Theory in Mainstream Cinema**

Since other disciplines in humanity and social science, gender became an important issue in film studies, too. This concern follows a parallel historical development with other non-mainstream approaches such as subaltern studies, race studies, psychoanalytic readings and so on. When thinking about gender studies, the term can be sounded as everything except the approval of representation of heterosexual man in a heroic manner, so the term refers to explain "the other" as in Lacan's theory. The gender in film studies can be analyzed according to how it is represented and how it is a reception. While the representation deals with how the structure is constructed, the reception focuses on deconstruction and allows multi-readings according to the identity of the audience (Hayward, 2006a: 179-184). These multi-readings can be associated with the work of Stuart Hall (2011) contemporary with the gender studies.

The evolution of the gender studies in cinema dates back to 1970s within a parallel tend feminist movement in the society. "Feminist film studies emerging from this juncture, has been both highly specialized in its theoretical debates on representation, spectatorship, and sexual difference and broad in its cultural reach and influence. It has also involved a dual focus on critique and cultural production." (White, 1998: 117) One of the most important works about this topic belongs to Laura Mulvey named

“The visual pleasure and narrative cinema”. In the named work, she underlines the gaze and she positions the audience as male (1975). With re-thinking on her work, via taking into account of King Vidor’s *Duel in the Sun*, she develops her work and states the female audience shares the same point of view with the male audience so that all structure is constructed in order to gain obey of the *male’s gaze* (1989). “As a critical methodology, feminism makes salient the category of gender and gender hierarchy in all forms of knowledge and areas of inquiry.” (White, 1998: 117) When talking about gender, the issue is not only feminist criticism but also gay and lesbian criticism. With the effect of the rise of the gay and lesbian movement in society and with sharing same concerns with early feminist studies, gay and lesbian criticism gains importance in film studies. (Smelik, 1998: 135-136) One of the main works about this issue is written by Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet* in 1981. In the named work, Russo betrays a “‘re-visionary’ look” that results the “rediscovery of forgotten films, directors, scriptwriters, producers, and actors and actresses; precious findings which would often be shown on the gay, and lesbian film festivals that came into existence at the time, first starting in San Francisco in 1976.” (Smelik, 1998:135)

Although the study of homosexuality in cinema dates back to 1970s, the representation of homosexual characters dates back to early years of cinema. “Homosexual characters could be glimpsed in films - as they still can today. However, the presence has characteristically been coded while homosexual characters have been taunted, ridiculed, silenced, pathologized, and more often than not killed off in the last reel” (Smelik, 1998: 135).

Films, in Hollywood, were criticized for reproducing dominant stereotypes of homosexuals, such as sissy, the sad man, the gay psychopath, the seductive androgyne, the unnatural woman, or lesbian vampire-and failing to represent ‘real’ gays and lesbians.” (Smelik, 1998: 136). Stereotyping always works in society both to establish the hegemony of the dominant group (heterosexual white men) and to marginalize and exclude other social groups (homosexuals, blacks, women, the working class). Stereotypes have sharp oppositions between them. They are also normative. Stereotypes of gays and lesbians such as the queen and the dyke reproduce norms of gendered heterosexuality because they indicate that the homosexual norm: that they can never be a ‘real’ man or woman (Smelik, 1998: 136). Stereotyping categorizes the gay and lesbian characters as distinct from straight characters and maintains the boundaries between them. (Smelik, 1998: 137).

Since the study broadens, it turns to a queer theory that “shares with feminism an interest in non-normative expressions of gender and with lesbian, gay, and bisexual studies a concern with non-straight expressions of sexuality and gender. However, queer film and popular culture theory and criticism have developed as much as a reaction to feminism and to lesbian and gay work as it has been an expansion of this work.” Some claims this theory is related to the audience more than production, some claims the position of the film about the issue is distinctive –for example if it responses AIDS crisis, LGBT activism, or other agenda about the issue or not- (Doty, 1998: 148). “‘Queer’ was a representation that ‘makes heterosexuality strange’” (Nataf quoted by Erhart, 2005: 174). However Doty states, “‘queer’ might be used to describe the intersection or combination of more than one established ‘non-straight’ sexuality or gender position in a spectator, a text or a personality.” (Doty, 1998: 149). Hence the term allows explaining the characters and plots in mainstream cinema.

## Film Analysis

In this section the nine films that are selected due to the highest audience number in the screening year in which involve queer characters will be analyzed.

*Anlat Istanbul (Istanbul Tales) (2004)*

Dir.: Ömür Atay (segment “Little Red Riding Hood”), Selim Demirdelen (segment “Cinderella”), Kudret Sabancı (segment “Snow White”), Yücel Yolcu (segment “Sleeping Beauty”), Ümit Ünal (segment “Pied Piper”)

The film is called *Anlat Istanbul (Istanbul Tales)* produced with different five directors that tell five interconnected stories that are Istanbul based fairytales set in modern-day; Snow White, Cinderella, Pied Piper, Sleeping Beauty and Little Red Riding Hood. The women in the film are stalemated and pushed under a male-dominated structure. The most important character is Cinderella for this study. Cinderella loves a boy and she is a transsexual character. At first look, we cannot understand the gender of Cinderella because the director chooses a woman for Cinderella. In a scene, when she asks for forty or fortyone sized shoes to the seller who is her secret love, the question was even she is a transsexual or not. Deep voice, squalid and welding hairs, these are other impressions about her gender identity. Finally, she says to him: "I am not a girl". Unfortunately, he does not understand what she says.

She works for a man who is a pimp and stays with a couple of women. Cinderella's roommates do not like her. One of her roommates tells to the boss about Cinderella this: "She 'is' half vagina", so her roommates disdain Cinderella.

Cinderella's fairy is a gay whose name is Mimi. Mimi is an extremely feminine character and homosexual. Cinderella symbolizes 2000's, but also Mimi symbolizes 1970s. Some differences between Cinderella and Mimi are as follows; Cinderella had a chance for surgery, the peer pressure in 2000's is less than the 1970's, Mimi has some evening dresses and other stuff special to women but he never used them easily.

#### *Döngel Karhanesi (2005)*

Dir.: Hakan Algül

Bertan is a homosexual approximately 60 year old, owns a panel house called Döngel in a small town. The bank that Bertan borrows from is swindled by the boss of the bank and then with a misunderstanding with a word (while *kerhane* means panel house in Turkish, *karhane* means the place that has an excess profit) the government forecloses on a mortgage for the panel house of the Bertan. Government officials have to make the panel house profitable and then sell it to back to him. That official is a prejudiced and moody and obsessive person before he meets Bertan, but at the end of the film, they become good friends. In the first scene that Bertan is seen, he wears janissary band of musicians' costumes -that Ottomans wore- for a show in the town, and the at the last scene he wears *keffiyeh* while going to Middle East for a secret mission to solve the problems in the region because they achieve the first goal that is to make the panel house the most profitable intuition in the country so the VIP think the official that Bertan works with can solve the bigger problems and that official conditions he will team and decides to work with Bertan and the women in the panel house. During the movie, Bertan does really nor feel proud or be ashamed of the job he has to do in the panel house even he is not so happy. He thinks the universe is so big and the people do not need to self-importance. He is an intellectual; and also an honest and positive person. The women he worked with likes him, call him "brother" and he tries to help them, too. He is also a funny and emotional person. Even the story is exaggerated; the character and behaving of Bertan are so realistic. His jest and mimics and also speech are not a part of a stereotyped character. Just the word "ayol" is the significant for stereotyping.

#### *Keloglan Kara Prens'e Karsi (Keloglan vs. the Black Prince) (2006)*

Dir.: Tayfun Güneyer

The story starts on the day Keloglan goes bald. Keloglan is in love with Cankiz, the princess of the Kingdom of Good. Cankiz however, is attracted to the Black Prince of Evil neighboring Kingdom of Vandams. The Sultan of the Kingdom of Good and his wife want their one and only daughter Cankiz marry Keloglan but they do not want to upset Cankiz who does not want this marriage.

Now the Sultan asks Keloglan and Cankusoglan (his friend), steal the gold belt from the waist of the cruel giant and bring it to him. Keloglan throws himself into a new adventure for the sake of love and sets off with Cankusoglan and his donkey.

In that journey, they meet a warrior clan that is called Dearie (Biricikler). All members of the clan are men also gay. There are two types of the member; the warrior one and the worker for daily jobs. The warriors have strong muscles, on the other hand the others don't have muscles.

Dearie looks like Amazons, but they are ridiculous. Some war weapons are covered with zebra and leopard fur. Their eyebrows are plucked and they have light make-ups. In the other scene, we understand that The Clan of Dearie is not warrior clan actually because they are going to the wedding ceremony of Black Prince and Cankiz as a musician.

The film genre is comedy film that makes fun of homosexuality to inject different comedy element which is used as commercial but it is brought about othering the homosexuality that is identified with some props like zebra and leopard furs. That's why one of the ideas is cultivated in our perception; the leopard and the zebra patterns for feminine people. So the patterns are used as the sign of The Clan of Dearie.

#### *Kabadayı (2007)*

Dir.: Ömer Vargı

A former bully, Ali Osman, learns he has a 24-year-old son, Murat, and his son is in trouble with the mafia. In the film, the homosexual character is Sürmeli (a nick means "blackened with kohl" because he makes up in every situation). Sürmeli is seen in the film while reading a newspaper in a hospital room and keeping vigil over a sick woman, ex-darling of Ali Osman. Sürmeli knows and respects Ali Osman, when he was young, he was under attack by bad men, but Ali Osman rescued him. Sürmeli is a mediator and loyal person. He also values religion, he says "I will call you before, and explain everything but she makes me take an oath upon Quran". While Ali Osman was in prison, Sürmeli acts as a father to Ali Osman's son. His son learns that Sürmeli is not his biological father, leaves home. Even Sürmeli is his father legally he acts as he is a mother. While cooking Sürmeli reproves son because of his behaving to Ali Osman. Sürmeli really cares and loves his son, but his son is ashamed of him and Sürmeli says to son, "You did not leave because I'm not your real father, you did leave because I'm your homosexual father."

Ali Osman and Murat hide from mafia, mafia comes home to learn where they are, two scenes before that scene Sürmeli is again cooking and makes up. Then when mafia comes he never gets afraid and then says "I am not afraid, ask me why, because none of you has the ass I have" and mafia kills him because he does not inform on where Ali Osman and Murat are. But Ali Osman's other former bully friends –who are all heterosexual- are afraid and tells mafia, and Ali Osman says "You all cannot be as Sürmeli". Even he is a positive character, from beginning to end of the film, Sürmeli's feminine behavior is somehow larger-than-life. His homosexuality is underlined to show he is more "blade" from some heterosexual male people.

#### *İssiz Adam (2008)*

Dir.: Çağan Irmak

Alper is a young, handsome man lives in İstanbul. He owns a bistro in one of the elite districts of İstanbul. In the first scene audience learns he is bisexual and hedonist, he finds a couple in a chat room than meets them. One day he falls in love with a young woman Ada. Ada meets Alper's mother and they become good friends. While Alper's mother is burgher, Alper lives the way as he belongs to city. He is not so comfortable with his mother, he acts he finds the tradition such as wedding ceremonies she gives an importance banal. Alper's mother and Ada go together a wedding ceremony of relatives. Alper tries to act as monogamous but he cannot so he decided to get separated from Ada but he can never forget her. Although his sexual life is not secret, the film does not say anything about the relation between his life

and his relationships. It is not clear if he has separation anxiety so double crosses or if his sexual life does not let him to leads a quite relation.

*Gunesi Gordum ( I Saw The Sun ) (2009)*

Dir.: Mahsun Kırmızıgül

*I Saw the Sun's* story is about several families living a small village in Southeast Anatolia that is close to a zone being a terror. A couple of family moves to Istanbul from the village due to terror. A few days later, one of the families takes refuge Norway from Istanbul. The other family stays in Istanbul. It has six members. Istanbul is biggest, chaotic city, therefore the process of adaptation is nearly hard for them.

Kadri is the younger brother of the family. We are analyzing Kadri character for the study. Kadri is looking like a regular man, but some of his behaviors thinking us he is a probably gay. An example; the older brother of Kadri waits for a baby, but he wants a boy, not a girl (The film is sanctifying boys and masculinity in a lot of scenes). The baby is born as a girl and then Kadri runs to the older brother to give the news. Kadri says; "Good news" with a feminine body language. For this reason, the middle brother shouts him: "Scoundrel". The middle brother is the part of patriarchal system. In the patriarchal world, you must be strong and masculine. If God gives penis, you need to advocate this honor. The middle brother never settles for transformation from masculine to feminine. In the other scene, Kadri watches a kind of woman program on television (probably a marriage show) and he takes off woman announcer, with tippet on his own shoulder. The middle brother slaps in his face because of Kadri's feminine acts and voice.

*"You are born with only one; a male or a female in the village life. It cannot be more than this thought".* So Kadri does not identify his own gender identity.

He meets a transsexual, her name is Canan (her real name is Can), he gets acquainted with other gender identities with her. The urban transsexual's behaviors are more relaxed than Kadri's. Also she can talk about her own gender identity easily. This situation depends on the structural transformation of the public and the urban transformation. The politic and economic relations of modern societies got loose between public and private sphere borders (Çaha, 1998: 91). Considering these facts, Kadri was born and grew at a village wherefore Kadri normally is not comfortable than Canan.

In the other scene about Kadri; he meets a man who is a friend of Canan and this man kisses Kadri's cheek. Unfortunately, Kadri's middle brother sees all and he goes crazy. He starts to run to catch him, at the same time Kadri tries to escape. When Kadri is caught in the dead-end street by his middle brother who beats Kadri badly. This punishment is the reborn for Kadri. He decides upon his own gender identity and starts to make up. The middle brother sees him again but this time Kadri waits for his own punisher as confidence and then the same punishment scene is repeated by the middle brother. Kadri finds his own sexual identity. Finally, the sexual transformation is completed for Kadri who says to Canan: "I killed the man who lives inside of me". She starts to intercourse with men for money. The final scene for Kadri is to be killed by her own middle brother.

*Yahşi Batı (2010)*

Dir.: Ömer Faruk Sorak

The film is a western comedy about two Ottoman officials who are on duty for carrying a precious gift to the US president kidnapped by Indians in America in the late 1800s. During the adventure, they meet a baleful sheriff that wants to kill them and take the gift for him. The sheriff decides to find a hit man, Buck Berry of Brokeback, for this job. But Buck Berry likes one of the officials and he does not kill them. The official is irritated and runs away. He is seen only in two minutes of the film. His appearance is just for joy and to make a reference to another western film, *Brokeback Mountain*.

*Dedemin İnsanları (2011)*

Dir.: Çağan Irmak

The film *Dedemin İnsanları* (The people of my Grandfather) tells a story about the relationship between a boy and his grandfather and the effects of his grandfather's well behaving on the people of that town in the late 1970s. These people are all "other"s, migrants, insane peoples, queers who are not warm reception and one of them is the queer character of the story is Ercan and he is in his 60s. The family in the story counts him and asks every time if he could keep a strict watch on the boy when he goes to the beach where Ercan runs a café. Ercan is a man who spruces up. As he lives apart from the town he is more secure. Whenever he comes to town to solve the problems between the boy and his grandfather, flotsam and jetsam try to do an injury to Ercan's feelings by saying him "My Ercan, do you want me to come for you this night?", but because he is a self-confident character, he also answers him "Please come my dear, but if you will be weak as you were in last night, please do not kick up a fuss". He is a problem saving and polite person and generally lives in grandfather's family with his boyfriend. After turning back from the evening meal, accompanied by a love song we see a short scene that he hold hands of his boyfriend. After the military cope in 1980, we see him talking with grandfather, and this speech shows Ercan is an also intellectual and fair character. The only stereotype part of the character is a word he uses "ayol" commonly used by queer characters and women.

*Zenne (2012)*

Dir.: Caner Alper, Mehmet Binay.

Differently from other examples in this study, *Zenne* is an independent, queer film that contains homosexual characters for not underline the heterosexuality, but for telling their stories. While discussing the main problematic areas of gays' everyday's lives, such as the procedure that if a gay does not prefer to attend the compulsory military service obligation, he has to prove his sexual life with showing a *brief* picture to the commission; or a gay's disability of working in *normal* working areas rather underground bars or etc. If he does not act as he is heterosexual; *Zenne*, uses a cinematic language that does not exaggerate the characters and narration despite the narration itself is a big drama that was inspired by a real life event, life of Ahmet Yıldız shot by most probably his father because he was gay, and his murderer could not be caught since 2008.

Because the film focuses on a narration about a story homosexuals but not on homosexuality, the main three lead actors who perform gay characters but each of them does not create or re-create stereotypes that are commonly used in mainstream cinema. These, three characters are Can, Ahmet and Giovanni have different stories and they have different personalities.

Can, zenne-the dancer, has the strongest expression with his clothes, acts, talking. about his gender among the other two characters Ahmet and Giovanni. Ahmet is a university student lives in Istanbul and has come from Urfa –the southeast part of Turkiye where the feudality and patriarchal mentality is stronger- acts as he is heterosexual in his daily life and to his parents, he has to wear more unisex colors and clothes, he gives secret commission to a man that was charged with the duty to follow and report his life to his parents who are suspicious about their son's gender with taking account to his behaving, in the film. His mother cut off one of his t-shirts because it is red –thinking as it is not suitable for a man-, but when they went back to Urfa, he still lives the life he wants. As he studies, he also works as a tutor, because he seems as he is heterosexual, and so he has a more easy life in social life. While Ahmet hides from his family and society from a psychological perspective, his friend, Can have to hide from state officials physically, because he is not minded to prove his sexual life with showing a brief picture taken during a sexual intercourse to the army's commission. He has to work in hidden places, in hidden fortune teller cafes as a fortune teller, or underground bars as a dancer. Can has a liberal family and he was accepted as the way he is. So they help Can, during the problems he faces. The Giovanni is a German

photographer; he is older than Can and Ahmet, he hides from his remorse because while taking a picture in Afghanistan, accidentally he results in children's dying because of mine. But his family is also liberal and he is open about his gender. After having a love affair with Ahmet, he first becomes jealous because he saw Ahmet giving some money to a man, then he learns that man is charged by his family to tell what Ahmet is doing and Ahmet is stopping this man from giving him money. When he learns he wants Ahmet to be honest to his family, but Ahmet answers him as honesty will kill him. When they decide to go Germany together, Ahmet also needs to give a picture to the commission to be able to get a passport. The most important part of the film about representation is the commission scene. Because while presenting to photographs, Ahmet also needs to explain he is gay orally. However, he has to change his dress, because the commission will not accept he is gay as he is. Although he is a gay wearing white t-shirts, or having a mustache, as Giovanni, because of the main well-established reception about gays as they wear or behave in extreme ways, he has to act as somebody else; he has to act a gay stereotype to show his gender.

### Conclusion

Analysis of Turkish films shows that homosexuality is not accepted in society and they always represent implicitly and whimsically, as Smelick underlined in Hollywood cinema. Film and other media create certain gender stereotypes and through these stereotypes, it reflects dominant social values. While reflecting these stereotypes, the film reinforces them and presents them as natural. Today, some people think and agree that society is dominated by men; as part of society and daily activities, in relation to real life, we can also assume that men dominate film productions, too like being in study's films. All these also have inputs in those stereotypes while those are also influenced by those stereotypes.

Fejes ve Petrich (1993) note that gay men and lesbians are represented as in limited ways compare to heterosexual persons in any mass media due to 'mainstream effect'. Gay and lesbian representations can be accepted in this way by the heterosexual audience.

Studies of the portrayals of gay men and lesbians in film and television have soundly demonstrated how homosexual lives have been subject to systematic exclusion and stereotyping as victims and villains. As it can be seen in these films, gay and lesbian characters are caricatured when they get a chance to take place. It is apparent that realistic image of gays and lesbians is more related to the issue of identity (Özmen, Orhon, 2006;177-188).

We have some indicators in the films to make think gender identity that masculine or feminine. For example, homosexual characters have a deep voice, squalid and welding hairs. The overly polite behavior of men that gives us the impression that he was gay. About the props, if there are zebra and leopard textures who use men and that thinks us they are gay.

As the last expression, we say that; presentation of gays and lesbians may take place for two main reasons. One of them is to serve culturally accepted notion of gayness which is as part of its political agenda and the other one is to hook and keep its audience interested, which can be the main function of the program.

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